Notes on "Media Art History & Practices"

How are media artists educated: with what resources, under what circumstances, through which cultural institutions and educational institutions?

Thinking back, through the process of the factors that "produced" me as an artist, I hope together we can remember backwards, and bring those shared memories forward to continue with the process of looking at the role of art education institutions, both formal and informal. For the education of media artists is not only through the universities and the art colleges, but has also been through a network of related cultural institutions which it is important to introduce prospective media artists to: the artist run centre network, which in the early seventies was the only place to find media art work, video, performance and installations. This network broke down the formal relationship between the artist and the exhibiting institution and curator, and being artist run, brought forward work which had not yet been considered "art". Additionally, this network of institutions encourages development through apprenticeships, formal and informal with working artists, and within the variety of art institutions: galleries, museums, artist run centres. Today, apprenticeships, internships have been formalized with grants available from cultural funding institutions under the rubric of "training".

Looking back to the mid seventies, I remember Clive Robertson urging me to become a "video" artist--I have followed up his suggestions, however slowly. At the time of his suggestion in 1976-77, I had completed a degree in literature (1972), completed a half hour film (half hour documentary, 16 mm) (1973) with a Canada Council grant and an Alberta arts grant, and had been out to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (1974), where although I had been offered studio space and the ability to design

a program for myself, I chose not to stay: primarily because there was nobody teaching media installation, video or film. A cultural educational institution not only offers space and facilities to prospective artists in training, but also exposure to the art "world" through its faculty. At NASCAD, in 1974, Robert Frank had been there. And in a summer session, experimental film, with visiting artist Michael Snow, I was introduced to experimental film. For the most part, with some rare exceptions in the **mid-seventies**, the art schools, the universities and the museums and the galleries were not places where you could find contemporary media art. The Parachute Centre for Cultural Affairs was one of a network of artist run centres: located in Calgary, it was a cornucopia of information and visiting artists, both national and international, and exhibitions. It along with other artist run centres across the country formed a unique network of information and possibility. It was certainly gave me my art education (although it was not degree granting) and the direction of my work today. Additionally, in the **eighties**, the "apprenticeship" took place, informally: through the invitation to program Joyce Wieland's filmwork at the Art Gallery of Ontario retrospective of her work in 1987, as a programmer (and artist apprentice) I was able to go into discussions and theory and practice with Wieland, providing me with an enriched understanding of the melding of theory and artistic practice; along with an intense focus on process--change--through the working through of a project, what the materials tell the artist, along with the importance of mistake and experimentation. It also taught me a lot about the relationship of the artist to the cultural institution--the museum, and the huge gulf of understanding that the artist often has to leap across--to participate in the presentation of her work. At that

time in the eighties, I had completed formal graduate work in post modern theory and post colonial theory, both with writer-theorists: the element of working with practitioners of art was important in my understanding of the role of theory, not as an orthodoxy, as set of rule to follow, but as an enabling device. And although a lot has changed, in the late nineties, now over twenty years later, galleries, museums, and universities now embrace media art and contemporary theory, but the role of art education institutions vis a vis media arts is still a challenge: how to bring aspiring artists into the "system", how best to introduce them to an array of theories and craft, especially in the media arts, the technologies very much in flux. How to make theory an enabler, not a blueprint for a practise.

I'd like to start my artist's talk with a clip from a recent video work, "The Dreams of the Night Cleaners" which deals with the possibilities of secret-telling up against the force of official stories--what can't be told, and what must be said, the necessity and the difficulty of producing resistance. It draws attention to the apparatus of television and media, the possibilities of intimacy, the promise of broadcasting those stories outwards into a collection [not a collective] of televisions "out there somewhere".

Clip: The Dreams of the Night Cleaners, Devika's interview scene

To begin to approach the questions of how is media art work made, with what resources, under what circumstances, for what reasons and for which audiences? Looking back on ~~on a~~ this recent cycle of work exploring the possibilities of "subverting the narrative": I wanted to construct a narrative which would touch on, reach out to, expose the larger stories which contain our lives, our stories, public attitudes and official histories. What cultural theorist Frederick Jameson refers to as the "master" narrative from which all

other stories are generated. Like a xerox, or like a dubbing process in video. I see the metanarrative somewhat differently from Jameson: as a haunting, a story which seeps or leaks into other stories. I prefer Salman Rushdie's chutney metaphor: the pickling of history, the way stands flavour and seep into each other, becoming a story.

The metanarrative I refer to also makes reference to international monetary policies, the economic story which affects us. The story Devika tries to tell the interviewer is based on real incidents with the World Bank. There are certain stories which remain secret, stories which don't fit the "official" story.

The recent work, "The Dreams of the Night Cleaners," a one hour docu-fiction, an artist's television project, had its beginnings as a poetic prose work in 1989 and the video work was completed in 1995. The story has been published now in two anthologies, *The Road Home* (Reidmore Press) and *By, For and About* (Women's Press).

I worked with the subject matter visually and conceptually through two video works, and three different video installations. In the video work, "India Hearts Beat" produced through the Camera Obscura series, allowing combined facility use with the productions brought together by EM/Media working with the resources of EM and Rogers Cable in Calgary. In "India Hearts Beat" I began with three stories, performances and writings working out a sense of cultural displacement by my mother, by a friend, now living in Delhi again, Rachna Joshi, and me. The tape focuses on notions of homesickness and cultural displacement -- travelling not as a tourist, but as a foreigner. The Super 8 film footage I shot in India is re-processed, making a river of images and becomes a place of the memory and imagination encircled by the fabric of the narrative

and the video itself. This videotape works with tapestry as a device to connect the three journeys and as a device to construct the image, showing the viewer an electronic tapestry: literally using a sari to make a river of memories and using the electronic fabric of video itself to frame moving shots of India.

Clip: India Hearts Beat

Slides

This autobiographical work took me into an archeological dig through Canadian history and family history which I explored then through three different video installations: one, autobiographical on family history bringing my Indian grandmothers together with my grandmother of Scottish-Irish heritage in a multi-channel installation working with a video quilt, "My Two Grandmothers," 1991. The quilt as comforter, something which can hold us together, when the pieces threaten to explode outwards, fragment. Within this work, the painting of Frida Kahlo,"My Parents, My Grandparents, and I" gave me a sense of the legimacy of working with autobiography as subject matter. Also, the quilts of Joyce Wieland's working out mythologies, were important. The edit suite itself suggests numerous quilt possibilites: rectangles, circles, diamonds. The photographs under organza were constructed digitally through resources of Sony, the topas program, in 1991, not readily available; and combined archival family photos, video stills, reprocessed back and forth from the computer to the video edit suite, then outputting digitally as photographs. The installation brings together a re-imagining of personal and public history within a site constructed from actual fabric, video, still photographs, sandstone rocks and plants. This installation required the building of a computer

switcher (built by Andrew Jaremko) which I programmed: thus the four channels of the installation moved through the 25 video monitors and the quilt (rear screen video projector). By looking at some of the slides of the installation, you can see some of the configurations. The video monitors then became part of a moving fabric and/or wall mosaic design: the video becoming fabric and the fabric becoming video. The installation was lit as a night garden. The floor monitors were wrapped in saris and situated amongst sandstone rocks and plants. The monitors threw light onto the plants and the plants, video monitors and rocks, in a sense, making a place of the imagination -- a place where my two grandmothers finally met: one from India, the other from Alberta (with family connections moving back to Scotland). I videotaped the Scotland footage and, in India, I shot Super 8 mm film, which I later transferred to video, thus conveying two very distinct senses of place: the nordic and the tropical. I constructed video photographs on the Targa (output as photographs on a Sony machine) which were sewn into the diamonds of the quilt. Everything in the installation is seen through layers, giving a sense of memory and history as fragments, incomplete, and as distant -- seen through time, seen through other people, seen through stories.

Another installation, portraits of people working as night shift cleaners, "Working Portraits" 1992, a multi-channel installation places monitors for the twenty portraits in front of three bill-board sized light boxes, each box six feet by eight feet with five monitors suspended. The film transparencies for the light boxes were made digitally, the image constructed within a computer file and transferred directly for output as transparency (rare again at the time--1992, it required extensive trouble shooting and

testing). I chose to work with a video still as the source for the film transparency rather than a photograph because of the fabric texture of video, especially with the placement of the five video monitors in front of each of the lightboxes (the relationship of materials). Two of the people in the portraits work played roles in the docufiction, "The Dreams of the Night Cleaners". Through the work of the curator, Katherine Ylitalo, with The Nickle Arts Museum, taking a camera into the workplace became possible along with the production of the work. This work is inspired by the billboard projects of Syntax in Calgary. And certainly the visiting artists brought in from the U.K., Peter Dunne and Lorraine Leeson, were instrumental to this vision along with the work of a number of artists taking on the domain of the ad-makers, not leaving this terrain of message-making to the dreams of the admakers: what to clean your floor with, but to begin addressing the possibility of cleaning the nightmares, changing the metanarrative, transforming the larger stories which mythologize our lives.

A third installation which allowed me time to look into the archives, "Archival Moments," was constructed within a three week residency at SAW Video. In the National Archives, my search was initially for Mackenzie King's policy referred to as "the direct passage ruling". What I found in the archives, in the 1906 through 1908 time period, Mackenzie King was in charge of several Royal Commissions responding to the race riots in Vancouver and the intense anti-Asian sentiments in B.C. It was a time of economic downturn--in the reports, "clean/unclean" kept appearing along with the refrain, "these people are taking our jobs" which echoed with the attitudes expressed in the political and public spheres in the 1990's. The video installation works with archival

historical footage of Mackenzie King in a poetic haunting of history: three pink marble video monuments to remember buried moments in national and provincial policies (in particular, in British Columbia) which continue to shape attitudes today. These video "dreams" address both the public and the private lives affected by these policies.

The narrative, "The Dreams of the Night Cleaners," is a story of secret telling and haunting. Unlike Joseph Conrad's story, "The Secret Sharer"--two men on a ship--this is two women in an airline office--one a crew scheduler, the other, a night cleaner. I worked from the news stories prominent, still prominent today: the job loss facing crew schedulers with the merging of Canadian and American airlines, and the job loss facing cleaners as a result of contract work. The stresses which surface when people face job loss generates the story. The story is both researched and autobiographical: I wanted to tell my father's story--coming to Canada from India in the early fifties. Mackenzie King's policy had restricted, almost eliminated Indian immigration until 1948, with the United Nations declaration of Human Rights. With his dreams dashed--violence erupted. The fragments seen of a woman lying in blood, what appears to be a murder--are the character Usha's and my memories of her mother.

The narrative in DNC is structured as fragments: a television news talk show, a fairy tale, a mother/daughter argument, a workplace incident. A storyteller, also a night cleaner but of airplanes, intervenes, comments on the story. Formally, the borders and art direction are inspired by Indian miniatures--in the edit suite, I realized the "tiling" effect of Indian miniatures could be accomplished in video.

History is haunting these characters. The steam ship Komagata Maru floats

through Jeanne, the archivist's living room. It was a test case in 1914 of Mackenzie King's Direct Passage Rule (that is, non-stop passage, still impossible today with jets, not steamship travel).

The metanarrative I refer to touches on attitudes of racial purity, still alive in the concepts being expressed by the politicians today, at the end of the twentieth century, echoing the attitudes seen in the footage from the archives, 1906 through 1914, of the Vancouver Province newspaper. The sequence you'll see was constructed with a combination of live video footage brought together in the edit suite with 3 D graphics, through a system referred to a deviator. The graphics were originally built in an alias system, but were unable to be transfered and combined with live video footage; they were then transferred to Topas; the systems have been rapidly changing since that time, and this combination is now much easier to achieve.

Clip

The story "Dreams" moves into fantasy in its conclusion--a fairy tale to comfort wounded adults, "The Eggplant/Aubergine/Brinjal Story": laughter to explode the despair coming from the effects of public policy on our individual lives. "The Dreams of the Night Cleaners" makes reference to the larger public stories that threaten to engulf us and the smaller stories that constitutitue our lives.

These three installations, two anthologized stories, and the two video works, "India Hearts Beat" and "Dreams" came about through the support of a project costs grant from the Canada Council and a grant from the Alberta Foundation for the Arts. Through the support of curators and galleries and residencies (at SAW Gallery and at the Banff

Centre for the Arts). Through the Camera Osbscura Project with Rogers Cable at EM/Media. Through the editors of book projects, then through a workshop at New Iniatives in Film and Video, where five senior video and filmmakers were given the time to workshop our new works or works in progress (Midi Onodera, Fumiko Kiyooka, Premika Ratnam, and Maria Teresa Lorraine). In the process, we also assisted three other videomakers to complete their work when their workshop was not working out: clip from Shauna Beharry (Seeing is Believing) and Debbie Etienne (Footsteps of Our Ancestors): two clips --the first--video as document, videomaker as witness, pauvre video--made within a scarcity of means; the second--video as poetic narrative, videomaker as artist. Eloquence within a compressed period of production time.

One of the foremost challenges of continuing to be an artist is the diminishing resources, as the collective project of pubic funding to create public spaces for culture and health care and education are called into question. That question of survival makes the arts an often conflict-ridden environment, and makes the challenge of collectives and collaboration even more significant, along with the role of art education insitutions in preparing the students for the art workplace, the art world.

To talk specifically about my students' work: because I took on the challenge of making some a project requiring a lot of full-time work away from Calgary where I had been teaching for 6 yrs. over the last 6 yrs I have been working as an independent artist with visiting artist/lecturer, over the last six years, my role as teacher has most recently in January/February of '98 at universities & regional centres in India. In India, I was part of a Canadian Studies Faculty at the University of Baroda for sessions with university professors, PhD students & MA students in Can Studies. The workshops was interdisciplinary in its structure. my role to present talks on post-colonial visual context. In the process of my teaching. Combined with the presentations were individual consultations with graduate students, along with crits for students in the art dept at the University of Baroda. The post colonial context was particularly apt in India as part of the British Empire colonial rule was to conquer the imagination of the country through education, in particular, the discipline of English, along with the arts, videos, & give a lecture at the U. of Baroda & was reminded of the discussions. I was reminded of my teaching emanates from the lecture I gave at the University also for a week long session with M.A. level & PhD students.

where a Eurocentric perspective has placed non-European traditions in a category of "not art". Thus the participants were highly engaged with the presentations that addressed this understanding of "education" - its colonial uses" & post-colonial applications, along with an understanding of the role of culture in identity and community formation. The Univ. of Baroda workshop is held every two years - additionally, the Art dept at the U. of G. welcomes visiting artists - provides studio space for Sculpture & painting. At the time I was there, had an artist in residence from Holland. These links to India are ones I would like to bring forward.

To talk more about students: in Nov of '97, I was artist in residence through a YYZ artist in the community project accompanying an exhib. at the Art dept at the University of Guelph, as well as giving visiting artist talks at the Ontario College of Art & Design, Toronto School of Art, & York University Fine Arts dept. At Guelph, I worked for three weeks with Suzy Lake's group 300 & 400 level students in the production of tests

for a new work: a video installation combining video & photography. Working specifically with ~~her~~ her felt photo murals within the residency, I worked with the students, who became engaged in the process of this project. I gave critiques of the photo 300 + 400 level students' projects, and consulted with them on their works in progress. Similarly, I met with graduate students in video installation to discuss their works in progress & critique their work. The photo mural printing will take place this summer with the students participating, & then attending the installing of the exhibition at the Art Gallery of Peterborough, now scheduled for Spring 99.

Over the last six years I have given a number of workshops across Canada in video & video installation. Last week I met with one of the participants in Vancouver, Zainub Verjee, who has just completed her 1st video installation at the Burnaby Art Gallery for a group exhibition "Tracing Cultures" Zainub's installation "Through the Soles of My Mother's Feet" was begun in a V. installation workshop I gave at Video Out

three years prior. The workshop, she said, gave her the "blueprint" – the conception for the installations, its plan, a four channel multi media installation using the architectural elements of a mosque in its configuration & in its final presentation, was located in a mosque. The workshop also, she said, gave her the confidence to tackle this ambitious work. & the mentorship from the programmers to assist. In the process, I viewed her C.C. Urban Expl. grant application & served as one of her references.

Over the last six years as well, for 1 year I had an "official" apprentice, working with me & a filmmaker in Calgary within a Heritages, Cultures & Communities Apprenticeship program. Unusual since it's usually for city kids. Over the year, she gained a working knowledge of the process of researching and testing materials for a video installation project, "Dear Anna, Dear Sarah," a working knowledge of the process of writing grant applications to a variety of cultural agencies, & successfully received grants for her work & a bursary at the end of the apprenticeship; the

Arts Apprenticeship as it is structured by HCA, pays the apprentice $400./mo. for the duration of the apprenticeship, in this case, for 10 months.

Both the apprenticeship & workshops I've conducted are indicative of my teaching styles: Scientist Ursula Franklin talks about the importance of the notion of "stewardship" applied to aspiring artists, this would mean they are temporarily under our "stewardship" when they are students & deserve dignity & respect.

Additionally, over the last 6 years, I worked participated in a working board for the National Film Board's New Initiatives in Film & Video for Women of Color & Aboriginal Women. This fine year program went through growing pains, and became most successful when the NFB allowed us to structure it developmentally: using one CC, a cultural agency, which had as one of its principals, the participation of artists-advisors.

Accordingly we structured the training in several ways: apprenticeships, internships (year long) & "grants" at variety of levels - senior mid level first time. (entry level)

This prevented the NFTS as an agency from catering only to first time practitioners, always easier for an institution as it can. Even "mould" unfortunately, the incoming newcomers in whatever way it likes.

-Clip- From an early workshop - where participants were invited to get facilities access, ironically in a training workshop. I was part of a five women group of senior producers workshopping our current scripts. When we introduced the difficulties these participants were undergoing, we facilitated access to the video facilities & workshopped their scripts with them. Interspersed with short pd of time.

2 of the clips!

Duncan explains Footsteps of our Ancestors

- views as document videographer as witness to an event

Shaun says is believing

videographic narrative, video artist (in fact to me) but also to a public audience.

Prior to 1992, I taught for over twelve years at NTC College & U. of C. teaching communication, theory, writing, video & film history. During that time, I received a Distinguished Faculty Teaching Award at NTC. My students went on to further levels - working on novels, stories, poetic texts, working at graduate levels, then professionally teaching a full load of courses.

Simultaneously, while I was engaged in curatorial work, one extensive project was the "Heart of the Heart" (1989); the people who worked with me on the project in assistant roles went on to take on roles in the art community: Deanne Monroe with the Arts Council in Vancouver B.C., Micaal Nilo with a variety of roles as artist run centres - Video Pool & AICA - as well as producing his own work.

I particularly respect the Studio Arts Department for its record of achievements - faculty exhibiting & engaged in research, along with the successful graduates that come out of the program. This combination of professional practice, teaching, research & writing is the ideal

understanding along with a solid artistic practice is a teaching environment highly conducive to "producing" independent original artists, and is one I highly respect, and I thank you for inviting me to this interview. For the studio arts ~~program~~ department.